

Issue #33,
May, 2010

Created to comfort and encourage
consumers cautiously considering a
song-filled sojourn at
Opera Carolina's
2010 Season.

An



Operaphobic's

Guide For

Enjoying:

Verdi: **OTELLO**

Puccini: **LA BOHÈME**

Bizet: **CARMEN**

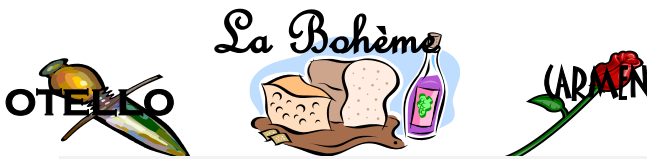
Acknowledgement

Greatly appreciated and effective in the development of this *Guide*, was the support, constructive comments and just plain, patient tolerance of:

- Maestro James Meena, General Director and Principal Conductor, Opera Carolina.

**Constructive criticism of
the *Guide* will be accepted,
(but, not always graciously).**

**With written permission of the authors,
any part(s) of the *Guide* series,
may be reproduced without charge
for fund-raising and/or educational purposes,
by not-for-profit opera-related foundations.**



**Opera Carolina 2010:
An Overview of the
Commonalities and Not-so Commonalities
Among the Season's Productions.**

Of the three Opera Carolina productions for 2010, two of them (*La Bohème* and *Carmen*) are perpetually found at the top of the international list of most popular¹ operas in the standard repertoire. *Otello*, while usually not in the Top 10 of an Impresario's list nirvana,² consistently comes close and is regarded as Verdi's tragic opera masterpiece--- that is praise for Caesar!

All three of the works appeared in 19th century Europe, probably operas' most creative and productive period. Two of them (*Carmen* and *Otello*) premiered within a decade of each other, respectively 1875 and 1887.³ *Bohème* appeared some ten years later (1896), on the edge of the modern opera era. At their debuts, *Otello* was an immediate success; *Bohème* opened to mixed reviews, but swiftly moved to massive popularity; as for *Carmen*, even today ambiguity continues as to public and critical regard at its debut. Most will concede it was not an overwhelming success; however, it probably was not an overwhelming disaster, as frequently claimed. It is commonly known though, that it took much subsequent production promotion to even begin placement of the work in its present, vaulted position of public popularity.

All three works found their plots in existing literature: a Shakespearean play and two very popular novels. The literature sources for *Otello* and *Bohème* also served other composers for creation of operas with similar story lines. A Rossini's version of *Otello* premiered in 1816.⁴ Leoncavallo's⁵ version of

¹ Also means, most frequently performed.

² This exclusion usually results from expensive and elaborate productions demands and/or needs for both a killer tenor and baritone (no pun intended).

³ For a historical reference point, somewhat bracketing the U.S.'s centennial year.

⁴The same year as his *Barbiere di Siviglia*.

La Boheme followed Puccini's by one year. However in the operatic world of dueling duplicates, the Verdi and Puccini operas quickly relegated their Rossini and Leoncavallo identical twins to the obscurity of an archival dustbin.

The three 2010 Season operas are unanimous in not ending happily: all their heroines leave this world as the curtain falls (not a pun); albeit, the ladies' departures are by different routes. In two, their he-men heroes also are headed for perdition. Such is the way of opera!

Probably the most bizarre feature the three have in common is, as their final curtain descends, all three heroes are weeping over the dead bodies of the heroines. Two of those heroines were done in by the now, weeping heroes! The third dies unassisted, except by a democratic contagious disease.

As to the composers, *Boheme* was the third of Puccini's ten operas, but the one that first brought him, though over a long haul, massive public and critical acclaim. *Otello* was the second to last of Verdi's operatic folio of thirty and, as noted, a real barnburner! Bizet's operatic portfolio was quite slim, probably five to seven works.⁶ Of those, two were mildly successful and occasionally are still produced; except for one, *Carmen*, the rest either never made it onto the stage or disappeared from view after one poorly received production. As to *Carmen*, most composers would kill to have that as their only recognized work. That opera though is credited with probably killing Bizet. He died of a "failed heart" three months after his gypsy's debatable debut. He did not live to see its veneration.

Among the three operas, their music is obviously, significantly different.⁷ However, it does have one thing in common, it is quite glorious and consistently a treat to the ear.⁸ You probably will never experience a more enjoyable, diverse operatic trio. So, try any one or--- all three!

⁵*Pagliacchi's* papa.

⁶Depending how you count. In general, an "accurate" count of an operatic composer's output is a moving target. Some composers revisit their original work for major rewrites (e.g. Wagner's *Tannhauser*); those re-dos some folks consider two operas, but some count only the original opera. Other composers will write one-act operas, combine them into a larger two or three act package (e.g. Puccini's *Il Trittico*); that product some folks count as one opera, or count it as three. Have fun!

⁷Spanish rhythms versus Parisian romantic versus grand Italian overkill (not a pun).

⁸And most productions are also, a feast for the eye.

GIUSEPPE VERDI'S **OTELLO**



LIBRETTO*: ARRIGO BOITO

*Based on the Victor Hugo translation of
SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*.

Original language: **ITALIAN**

Premiere: **LA SCALA, MILAN**
FEBRUARY 5, 1887



Verdi's Venetian Venture; Creating Cypriot Carcophony by Musicalizing a Militaristic Moor. (a.k.a. Background). [p.7]

An Off-the-Wall Orientation to an Operatic *Otello*. [p.15]

Who are These Caterwauling Cypriots and Vengeful Venetians Malodiously Mixing Multifarious Mayhem with Marvelous Melody? (a.k.a. The Cast). [p.16]

Tersely Telling a Tuneful Tale Mingled with Minute Memos Mentioning Memorable Musical Moments:

- **Act I. The Harbor Quay of Cyprus at night, really rocking and roiling in a raging storm. [p.20]**
- **Act II. A Hall-Terrace and adjoining Garden in one of Otello's Job Perk's, the Governor's Cyprus Castle, noonish the day after Act I. [p.24]**
- **Act III. The Great Hall of the Governor's Castle, at some unspecified hour post-Act II's day. [p.29]**
- **Act IV. Desdemona's Digs in the Governor's Castle, during Act III's night. [p.37]**

The Operatic Otello, One Man's Opinion.

"The truth is that instead of *Otello* being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespeare, *Othello* is a play written by Shakespeare in the style of Italian opera. It is quite peculiar among his (Shakespeare's) works in this respect. Its characters are monsters; Desdemona is a prima donna with a handkerchief, confidante and vocal solo all complete and Iago though certainly more anthropomorphic than the Count di Luna, is only so when he slips out of his stage villain's part. Othello's transports are conveyed by a magnificent but senseless music, which rages from the Propontick to the Hellespont in an orgy of sound and bounding rhythm;* and the plot is a pure farce plot; that is to say, it is supported on a desperately precarious trick with a handkerchief, which a chance word might upset at any moment. With such a libretto Verdi was quite at home; his success with it proves not that he could occupy Shakespeare's place but that Shakespeare could occupy his."



George Bernard Shaw
March, 1901.

*Shaw's use of the phrase, "The Propontick---et. al." is an allusion to Othello's Act III, Scene 3 speech to Iago. In the play's speech, the Moor is assuring Iago that his commitment to dispose of Desdemona is like those eastern Mediterranean waterways :raging and moving only in one fatal direction. No change, no return!

**VERDI'S VENETIAN VENTURE:
CREATING CYPRIOTIC CARCOPHONY BY
MUSICALIZING
A MILITARISTIC MOOR.
(a.k.a. Background)**



Bucolically Basking Between a Singing Slave and a Moody Moor.

Comparatively speaking, Verdi's operatic career began late; he was twenty-nine when his third opera, but first success, *Nabucco* appeared.⁹ However, Verdi made up in career longevity for the late beginning; he composed some thirty+ operas over sixty-five years!¹⁰

In 1871, at age fifty-one, his twenty-eighth operatic composition, *Aida*, was an instantaneous international success, despite the Franco-Prussian War complicating the opera's production and its Cairo premiere.¹¹

Verdi, probably was aware that true success is knowing when to get off stage, therefore he retired from operatic composition immediately after the *Aida* triumph. Why not? He was honored in Italy and throughout the operatic world as "a" major composer, if not "the" leading operatic composer of his day. He was revered in Italy also as a significant political force that

⁹ As to earlier blooming composers, Rossini's operatic success began at age eighteen and Donizetti's at twenty-one.

¹⁰ Some of you Type A readers are probably noting at this point, that all our math does not pan out. Well, there were some earlier operas before *Nabucco* that we would just as soon not talk about. C'apisce? Besides, tabulating Verdi's works is like a shell game, largely because he extensively revised some operas post-premiere, and they are frequently counted therefore, as two.

Not only was Verdi's career long-lived for that era, he was also long-lived dying at age 88 in 1901.

¹¹ For details on this complication, see *Aida*, Irreverent Guide # 18, January 2007.

successfully assisted in the unification of that country.¹² He was wealthy with a large country estate, where he was pampered and protected by his second wife, Giuseppina Strepponi (1815-1897).¹³

It must be noted that the composer's move to retirement was not solely because he had no more musical worlds to conquer. Verdi was extremely sensitive, almost pathologically so. It appears that the more success he achieved, the more insecure he became; further, he increasingly viewed his works as underappreciated. Therefore, if that was the way the world regarded him, he'd just pick up his marbles and go home! In addition, Wagnerism was sinuously infiltrating the operatic music of Italy and Verdi would have none of that Germanic garbage!.

Whatever the reason, Verdi retired to his country acreage, Sant' Agata, resolved not to compose any new operatic music--- forever! Apparently, the Maestro had a rather narrow definition of retirement; composition of any new opera(s) appears to have been the only musical activity he excluded.

During what turned out to be a rather short-lived retirement, Verdi did compose his String Quartet in E Major (1872) and his concert choral masterpiece, *Requiem* (1874).¹⁴ Because of its near-operatic form, this piece

¹² For more about, see *Nabucco, Irreverent Guide #1*, October 2003.

¹³ Strepponi was an operatic soprano of great European renown, creating the prima donna roles in many major operas. She was responsible in a large part, for Verdi's *Nabucco* being staged, and in which she created the role of Abigaille. However, her strenuous performance schedule led to her voice going south. Ironically, she then became a renown voice teacher. She had three children "without benefit of clergy" as a result of two lengthy affairs, one with a leading tenor of the day and the other with the Impresario at La Scala. Her romantic entanglements with Verdi began in 1847; eventually they were married in 1859. Their relationship was quite happy, and she also, was very much the dragon successfully guarding the gates to Verdian social and business access. Biographers credit a large part of the composer's wealth and later artistic success to Strepponi's management.

¹⁴ The *Requiem* was composed in honor of Verdi's recently deceased friend and famed Italian poet / novelist of the mid-19th century, Alessandro Manzoni. The piece is

is alleged to have signaled Ricordi et. al. that Verdi was probably ready to reengage operatic composition.

“No (operatic) composition forever,” lasted not quite a decade [1872-1880].¹⁵ Late in that short-lived retirement period, a new man-in-charge (Giulio Ricordi) appeared in Verdi’s publisher’s empire (Ricordi and Sons). Giulio was both skilled and patient in the care and cleaning of composers. That talent, silkily snared the Maestro’s interest in Shakespeare’s Moor and also, recharged his operatic engines. A key figure in Giulio’s gambit to get Guiseppi going again, was the Italian poet, opera librettist and wannabe composer, Arrigo Boito.

**A Pause in Our Proceedings,
Permitting a Bit of Boito Background.***

*Normally don't spend a lot of space on librettists; however, Boito was such a strong influence on Verdi and others, a perusal pause seems prudent.

Like several other operatic compositional wannabes,¹⁶ Boito (1842 – 1918) is better remembered by history as a skilled, late 19th century Italian librettist, than for his note notation.

Boito completed only one opera, *Mefistofele*¹⁷ which was produced (1868) at La Scala. Not well received, it caused riots and duels throughout the city, largely as the result of the piece’s alleged “Wagnerism.”^{18, 19} To control the

considered by many as almost operatic in sound and structure, so Verdi might have already been hedging his “no opera composition” declaration..

¹⁵ Apart from some tinkering with *Aida*’s ballet music for its Paris premiere, his “no opera composition” vow held

¹⁶ E.T.A. Hoffmann (as in *The Tales of---*), is one prime example.

¹⁷Based more directly on Goethe’s *Faust* than Gounod’s 1859 opera.

¹⁸The Italians did and still do, take their opera seriously. However, contemporary riots in the streets of Milan etc. are probably more about politics than “criminal” composition.

¹⁹“Wagnerism” at this period throughout Europe (excepting Germany), was probably less acceptable than “communism” in the US during our 1940s-50s McCarthy era.

civil disobedience, the Cabienerri closed the opera after two performances. Of that premiere, Verdi observed, “Boito aspires to originality, but succeeds only at being strange.”

Boito withdrew the opera,²⁰ extensively reworked and shortened it. That version premiered some seven years later, was a success. Although not considered a member of traditional operatic repertoire, *Mefistofele* still appears frequently on the international opera scene. When he died, Boito left an unfinished opera, *Nerone* on which he worked almost all his professional life. The piece was finished by Toscanini and in 1924, premiered successfully at La Scala.

Boito’s true genius was as a poet was in the development of operatic libretti. Among the notable non-Verdi operas he developed was Ponchielli’s *La Gioconda*. He also was a formidable translator of operas into Italian including Wagner’s *Reinzi* and *Tristan and Isolde*; Weber’s *Freischutz* and Glinka’s *Ruslan and Ludmilla*.

Many critics credit Boito with inspiring Verdi to true compositional genius. The poet constructed the libretti for Verdi’s last two operas, both of which are considered by many as the Maestro’s masterpieces, *Otello*²¹ and *Falstaff*. Boito also extensively revised the libretto of Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* which originally had a less than successful premiere. The revised version (1881) met with great success and is still frequently presented today.

Boito’s poetry for Verdi’s music originally began in 1861-62 when he developed the text for the Maestro’s cantata *Anthem of the Nations*. It was well received at its London debut in 1862. Unfortunately the collegial relationship between the two men was ruptured by a Boito observation about Verdi that was perceived as an insult by the notoriously thin-skinned

²⁰ As if, he had a choice!

²¹ To keep our text less confusing than it might already be, we will refer to Shakespeare’s play as *Othello* (English) and Verdi’s opera as *Otello* (Italian).

composer. They remained professionally apart for many years, until Verdi's psychological wounds began to heal. By 1880, professional respect between the two had been fully repaired. The scene was set now for Giulio Ricordi's skilled use of Boito and Shakespeare to bring Verdi to *Otello*.

Rousting the Maestro from Retirement. Ricordi's strategy to snare Verdi back to opera was less imbroglione than the cautious and patient trolling of a skilled fisherman. In 1879, Boito, encouraged by Ricordi, was developing *Othello* into an operatic libretto. Early in that year, a dinner was arranged that included among others, Ricordi and Verdi. Some of the other guests were briefed in advance that Ricordi wanted discussion of *Othello* as an opera and Boito as a poet for such a new effort. Both subjects were discussed at length with Verdi participating, but not committing. The next day Boito was sent to Verdi's hotel to review for him a sketch of the evolving opera. Verdi refused to see the poet, but kindly. Verdi demurred on the grounds that any observations of the Maestro's would be interpreted as a commitment he was unwilling to make--- yet.

Over the next several months, the modified cat and mouse game continued, with Verdi's resistance eroding. Eventually, he was hooked; the poet and the composer began development of their musical Moor. In order to hide the project from the public and the press,²² all the written communications among Ricordi, Boito and Verdi referred to the evolving opera as "chocolate."

Opera-izing *Othello*. Verdi was not the first to tackle *Othello* for an opera, that honor appears²³ to belong to Rossini.²⁴ His *Otello* premiered in

²² Paparazzi and a press-fueled feeding frenzies are not strictly mores of our modern world. Had the news that Verdi was once more composing an opera leaked out, the participants would have been swamped and harassed by a barrage of inquiries and other similar interferences. The "chocolate" cover appears to have been successful, since public awareness of the opera did not develop until the triumvirate was ready to announce.

²³There may be earlier ones lurking out there, but we cannot find them. So, if you do, you're one ahead of us.

1816, the same year as his *Barbiere*.²⁵ It was a success, although not in the same league as *Barbiere*. It played reasonably regularly and internationally over the next seventy years, until Verdi's version appeared. Since then, it is seldom heard; when it is, it appears to be treated as a curiosity piece.

While using Shakespeare as his source, Rossini and his librettist (de Salsa) eliminated Cyprus as a setting and moved all the action to Venice. In addition, they scrapped most of the play's plot except for the characters and their varied fates.²⁶ Musically, its last act seems to have been the most notable, especially an atmosphere-setting air for off-stage gondoliers.

Rossini was still alive, although long-since retired from operatic output, when Verdi and Boito began serious attention to their *Otello*. That fact, plus the "adequate" popularity of Rossini's version made them cautious and deferential in their version's development.

It should also be noted, the opera's evolution was comparatively slow,²⁷ contrary to both Boito and Verdi's work patterns. While the pair had other musical business during that period,²⁸ they clearly were treating the *Otello* with great thought and review. They perceived it was even for them, something special.

Pruning the Play. In addition to his perfect poetry, Boito's genius stroke with adapting the play was, contrary to Rossini, placing all the action on Cyprus. That immediately removed all the complicating events that occur in the play's Act I's Venetian setting. By "cutting to the Cyprus chase," Boito

²⁴ At the time Rossini was developing his *Otello*, Shakespeare's works were comparatively unknown in Italy. However, by the time of the Verdi version, the Bard was well-known and popular throughout the country.

²⁵ He was really a busy boy that year!

²⁶ Albeit the manners in which they found their fates is vastly different than Shakespeare's road map.

²⁷ Seven + years from scenario initiation until the La Scala premiere.

²⁸ Boito's re-do and premiere of *Mefistofele* and the pair's re-do and premiere of *Boccanegra*.

streamlined the Shakespearean events into a heightened dramatic focus on the play's single central action: the rise and tragic triumph of the green-eyed monster of jealousy. Puccini is noteworthy for such one-track tales with no complicating sub-plots; however, while not unknown among Verdi's works, such uncomplicated plotting (possible pun) is a rarity of the Maestro. In *Otello's* operatic scenario, the audience is thrown immediately into the tension of the plot and never truly released by any side events, before the final horror.

All's Well That Ends Well. In November of 1886, Boito received the following letter, "It is finished! All honour to us! (and to Him!!).²⁹ Farewell. G. Verdi."

Briefly said, all their time, effort and genius showed. The opera was a major triumph and has thru this day, retained its power and popularity. However, Verdi's "Farewell" although appropriately dramatic, was premature. Six years later, the pair produced their final triumph, *Falstaff*.



²⁹ Him = Shakespeare.

•

**AN OFF-THE-WALL
ORIENTATION TO
AN OPERATIC *O*TELLO.**





**WHO ARE THESE CATERWAULING CYPRIOTS AND
VENGEFUL VENETIANS MALODIOUSLY MIXING
MULTIFARIOUS MAYHEM WITH
MARVELOUS MELODY?**

(a.k.a. The Cast, in order of first vocal venturing.)

Montano (Bass). An emeritus executive (a.k.a. former governor)³⁰ of the Cyprus civil service. (Cyprus is the scenic site of our singing saga.)³¹ Montano seems to operatically occupy himself with emeriti-appropriate activities and Greek chorus-like commentary.

Cassio (Tenor). Conned into consuming copious chianti, this character boozes badly and then, broadsword brawls. Our moody Moor's main military man, he is brusquely busted by his boss for the boozing and brawling. That enables our evil Ensign³² (see Iago below) to generate a green-eyed monster to make mucho mischief and mayhem. However, our kid Cassio is dubbed by the Doge to be comandante delle truppe,³³ while our dueting lead duo (the Moor and his maiden) drop to their doom. Ain't life ironic?

³⁰ It has been rumored that Montano was booted from his bailiwick for trying to sell a senate seat in the Venetian Doge's Council. If true---, just like his Illinois cousin, though many generations removed!

³¹ FYI, the new guy is our moody Moor, Otello.

³² This "Ensign" moniker has antique origins. Way back when, it was the guy who carried the flag (a.k.a. an Ensign) for his battling boss. In our Cyprus situation, it signifies a senior assistant, but not a full-fledged deputy. That absence of authority is what has angered Iago.

³³ The troops' top guy.

Iago (Baritone). The villain of all villainies and the superlative of all that is sinister, this evil Ensign engineers our ensemble into an enormous assemblage of awful acts. Victorious vengeance is his vow and he is truly wondrous in his wily-weaving of a wicked web. Not a nice guy! Last seen heading for the harbor.

Roderigo (Tenor). Another Venetian patrician (see Desdemona below). He is the prime pal of, but also plum patsy for our evil Ensign. Ma warned him about carousing with the wrong crowd. His ignoring of Ma, enables him to experience death at an early age, although off-stage.

Otello (Tenor). This moody Moor (our hectored hero) magnificently maneuvers military minions, but is fatally flummoxed by his evil Ensign. When Otello is NOT handed a handkerchief by our harried heroine, his Desdemona doubts doom this duo of Moor and maiden. Damn!

Desdemona (Soprano). Our doomed Donna, also a Venetian patrician and our moody Moor's mate; she is a caged, cacophonous canary, cleverly co-opted by the evil Ensign, as his central character in a cat's-paw conspiracy to curtail Otello's career.

Emilia (Mezzo-soprano). Our Donna's companion, she is too late leery of the machinations of her malicious mate (a.k.a. the evil Ensign). While suspicious of her spouse's schemes, she is too slow to save our dueting Don and Donna from their doom. When she

does come to the party and perceives the plot, the doomed Donna and Don are already booked into a no-refund charter on Charon's craft. Dramamine not included!

Lodovico (Bass). The Doge's main man about the Mediterranean. He drops into Cyprus couriering some congratulatory correspondence concerning Cassio. That could wreck the web of woe woven by our evil Ensign!

Herald (Bass). He heralds. What else should he do?

Numerous others including but not limited to— choraling Cypriots, singing superbly while being soaked to the skin during a stagey storm; storm-saturated, sauterne-soused and slurredly-singing sailors and some sober, singing, saber-swinging soldiers; an innkeeper and his underpaid, non-unionized help; Venetian hoi oligoi, who know enough to come in out of the rain; and, some really cute, but cacophonous kids.

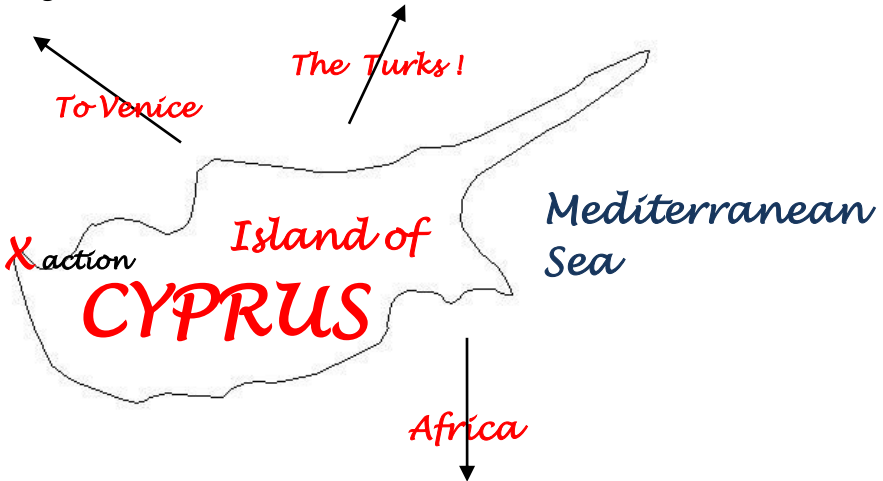


**TERSELY TELLING A TUNEFUL TALE
MINGLED WITH MINUTE MEMOS
MENTIONING
MEMORABLE MUSICAL MOMENTS.**



Time. Late 15th or early 16th century.³⁴

Setting:



The Plot and Other Miscellany.

- Before our opus opens, our heroic hero and his darling Desdemona have engaged in an elopement that has enraged her papa. He is plenty P.O.!
- No matter! Our hero is the darling of the Doge's Duma and can do no damage. To recognize his renown (and to pacify papa), he (and she)

³⁴ Take your pick.

are rewarded with a Mediterranean meander to trounce the Turks and coincidentally, cuddle on Cyprus. They vamoose from Venice.

- To assist in his annihilation assignment, our hero promotes his pal (Cassio) as his key commander. Big mistake!
- Cassio's quick commission really riles a resident rotter (Iago) of our hero's hierarchy. That petulant person wanted the pay and perks of the prime position for his own person.
- So, because of his pique, he plots to punish most of our principal players--- and coincidentally to give our composer a cause for a quantum of cacophony
- Cue the curtain!

Act I:

**A dark and definitely damp night,
on a Cyprus seaport really rocking and rolling in a storm.**

Una vela! Una vela! / A sail! A sail!*

Our opus opens sans overture. It does not need one! Without fear of much critical contrariness, the starting moments of this opera grab the ears and throats of the audience more swiftly and dramatically that possibly any other work in Opryland. The roar of the orchestra superbly replicates the tone and terror of a serious sea-storm. The stage effects of thunder and lightning add to the controlled chaos. Shortly, a massive chorus of concerned Cypriots** piles on. Their new governor (Otello) has taken their fleet out to battle the Turkish (a.k.a Ottoman) armada. Have the Venetians won? Even if, will they survive the storm?

A sail is spotted! It carries the insignia of the Lion of Venice! The good guys have won! But can their fleet breast the breakwater? It does, and that moment is greeted with great choral relief and triumph. The fleet arrives safely onto the on-stage harbor!

*For each of the major musical "moments," the opening line of the aria, ensemble etc. will be given in Italian and then, in an English translation.

**Among the chorusing locals are several Venetians, Montano and Cassio giving coastline commentary, and Iago with his companion-in-crime-to-be, Roderigo. That latter pair is less enthused about the fleet's progress than the rest. Iago tunelessly curses his commander's course, "May the ocean's seething belly be his tomb!" So, you know almost at once, he is not a happy camper.

- Announced in probably the most dramatic entrance in Oproyland, our hero hauls into view. As he drops dramatically onto the dock,³⁵ he melodically declaims at **multa forto voce**, the destruction of the foe's fleet.

Esultate! / Rejoice!

Otello's musical message to the chorus is brief, but to the point, "The Turks are toast!" The assembled crowd's cacophony is just short of cataclysmic as they greet the news of their deliverance. Robust rejoicing goes on a bit, but finally the celebration concludes, as does the stormy scene,

- When the Cypriot crowd cools their chorusing, our hero and his companions clomp into the castle (a.k.a. his palazzo perk). The scene is now clear for our villain (Iago) to vent his venom and vend his vengeance venture.
- His prime purpose at this plot point, is to weave into his web of woe-to-be, a conspiratorial companion. That rogue is to-be Roderigo, who currently is contemplating a self-administered watery grave.
- "Why," you ask? Well, he desires Desdemona but she is obviously otherwise too obligated elsewhere for Roderigo to romance—at least without a rough reprisal.
- "Just you wait," intones Iago, "My woven-web will win you the woman, as it murderously messes with the Moor! So, give me a helping hand to hatch our hate. Hokay?"

³⁵ Otello's physical (as opposed to vocal) entrance is quite dependent on the fitness of the tenor. We've seen "buff" guys jump from the ship's prow to the stage floor, other more obese Otello's carefully gambol down a gangplank; the really plump ones simply and most prudently, walk on-stage from the wings.

Su via, fa senno / Come, keep your wits about you.

Iago spins his conspiratorial seduction of Roderigo initially in a conversational, languid musical manner. Subsequently the piece turns guarded, then sinister. Returning to the more guarded tone, the bad guy directs his dupe off-stage (usually) and out of earshot, for a more private chat.*

*In the course of his Roderigo recruitment, Iago also imparts his hatred of Cassio and its cause. That guy really gives new emphasis to "carrying a grudge."

- The dockside *Sailors' Shanghai Shack and ABC Bar* now opens. A tumultuous throng of celebrating Cypriots troops on to toast with copious quantities of Chianti, the triumph of offing the Ottomans.

Fuoco di gioia / Fire of joy.

In a clearly "let's raise some hell" mode, the chorus creates a large bonfire. Their early music represents the slow flaming of the fire. However, as the fire fully flares, the musical rejoicing becomes more enthusiastic. It eventually segues into sounds that are more conversational as the celebrants tire of all that stomping and shouting. Finally, as their musical enthusiasm really begins to die down, so does the bonfire.

- As the Cypriots' Chianti consumption begins to cool, the dastardly duo (Iago and Roderigo) drift back to dockside where Cassio and some of the constabulary, have also been uncorking Chianti.
- The duo encourages Cassio to more consumption, but he has temporarily terminated his tipling.
- Iago eternally evil and intent on intoxicating Cassio, suggests some sauce sipping as a salute to their chief and his consort. A refusal would be poor protocol performance. What a sneaky guy!

- To further insure his "enemy's" intoxication, Iago intones a brindisi³⁶ after declaiming that "drinks are on the house."

Inaffia l'ugola! / Wet your throat!

The aria and choral response is very macho and rollickingly rhythmic. The subject of the piece is (what else but?) drinking! During its multiple choruses, Iago urges Cassio further towards drunkenness. When that effect has been achieved, Iago prompts his co-conspirator (Roderigo) to pick a quarrel with Cassio to start civil unrest that will disturb Otello's "night of love." Montano calling the castle watch interrupts the raucous climax.

- Cassio is caught in his cups. Our villain cruelly confides that he is seldom NOT in that staggering state. Montano is mortified.
- Roderigo as prompted, provokes the principals into a "to-do." Swinging swords soon surface, an alarm is announced and a crowd convenes to confront the combatants. The cacophony climbs!
- Into the deafening din, Otello arrives in a fiery fettle. He is faced with a mauled Montano, a sotted deputy (Cassio) and an innocent-appearing Iago.
- If that weren't enough to enrage the bile of our big boss, Desdemona disturbed by the din, drops by.

³⁶ A brindisi is a drinking song with solo-sung verses, but crowd-crooned choral responses. The term originated from a German phrase "(Ich) bring dir's / (I) offer it to to you," which was a traditional introduction to a toast. The *brindisi* name is identical to the name of an Italian city which is often credited as the source of this drinking song type. Nice story, but not true.

Verdi used a brindisi in several of his operasoperas; *Traviata's* is probably the most familiar. In that opera and in its societal setting and time, the song takes the form of a rhyming game as verse-creation responsibility is tossed from one participant to others; the choraling chorus however, remains de rigueur.

- That does it! The deputy is demoted for din-developing and all others are directed to disperse or die! As our guy seems really grumpy, the crowd circumspectly but quickly, clears.
- Stars have supplanted the storm, and the Moor and his Missus moon at the Moon. A love duet lurks!³⁷

Gia nella note densa / Now as the darkness deepens.

Of Verdi's many classic loves duets, this is perhaps one of the loveliest (and longest). A solo violin begins, shortly joined by the orchestra. Otello follows with romantic memories, slowly savored. Desdemona introduces her thoughts of their courtship. As she reaches her vocal climax, the tone of the music shifts into a more passionate direction. The musically pace quickens and then, their voices begin to blend. To intensely romantic music they kiss (un bacio) multiple times. With Otello urging "to bed," as Pinkerton will do in a later opera, they slowly sing their way off-stage (a la *La Boheme*) as the music rises to an eloquent pianissimo—but premature signal of conclusion. Probably because of the beauty of the duet and its quiet vocal conclusion, audiences are frequently tempted into applause before the music ends. Don't do that! You will inadvertently drown out its lovely, lyrical musical coda that languidly closes the Act. Wait till you see that baton drop! Then, whoop and holler!

- Cue the curtain. So much for Act I and we are off to the Wine Bar!

Act II:

**A Hall-Terrace and adjoining Garden in one of
Otello's Job Perk's,³⁸the Governor's Castle on Cyprus.
The time is near noon, the day after Act I.**

³⁷ Throughout the opera, Verdi will sparsely use melody from this duet, as a reminder to the audience of the former love of our doomed duo. Its appearance though is usually at rather ironic moments.

³⁸ The setting of this Act is usually designed so that in the backstage center of the hall there is a very large window(s) that opens onto a garden. Its bisecting of the hall makes it possible for characters to converse on one side of the hall and not be heard by those on the other. A plot-critical arrangement!

- The Act opens with a short orchestral introduction, appropriately, an abbreviated amalgam of *Otello's* music; some, past heard and some, future to-be-heard.
- At the curtain, Cassio is caught in a consuming conversation with his false friend, our villain of villains, Iago. The subject is Cassio's plunge from power.³⁹
- This slightly dense dupe is counseled by our clever conniver to hail our heroine and hype her to help him regain his rank.
- Iago indicates that shortly, gambling in the garden, will be our Donna doting on the daffodils, daisies etc. "Cassio, promenade with her among the posies and petition her to palaver with our potentate about your penitent position and plead for your (re)promotion."
- Cassio concedes that could be a constructive. He prepares to hail down our heroine, while the evil one sidles to the side of the hall to cacophonously communicate his creed of cunning and cruelty.

Credo in un Dio crudel / I believe in a cruel God.

Iago's *Credo* is one of Verdi's several gifts to baritones. In the hands of the right performer, it is a sure showstopper. In this musical monologue, our villain pours out a litany of his evil beliefs and his contempt for humankind. The music accompanying this frightful message is punishingly powerful. Almost the entire aria is delivered in full defiant voice, with occasionally soft, sinister asides. The piece climaxes with a diabolical laugh, of course!

- From sour to sweet---, our heroine appears and admires the anemones et. al. as our duplicitous Don pushes his dupe into the daises to dialogue with her.⁴⁰

³⁹ In the course of the men's musical exchange, Iago mentions that Cassio will soon be restored to his mistress Bianca. This woman plays a more significant role in the play, but is relegated to "name only" status in the opera. She is generally thought to be a courtesan and quite literally, Cassio's mistress. In the Act III duet/conversation between Cassio and Iago, she is the implicit subject and object of Cassio's ardor. However, Otello is deceived into thinking it is Desdemona..

- From his peeping-tom position, Iago informs the audience as to the garden goings-on. Then our Moor meanders in and his Ensign is ecstatic. Chance has enhanced his cruel concoction. Luck of the Louse!

Cio m'accora---che parli? / I like that not---

As Otello enters the hall, Iago looking into the garden says, "I like that not." He says it loud enough so that Otello will hear. The Moor asks Iago the meaning of his statement. This initiates a lengthy duet between the two men. From the onset, Otello is clearly led by Iago's web of misinformation. Musically, the early portion of the duet is almost conversational, questions and answers between friends. As Otello begins to perceive the direction of Iago's observations, his anger rises. He becomes the fierce warrior, though badly wounded. Iago ever the "honest" (onesto) friend feigns reticence. Despite Iago's warning to beware of jealousy, Otello demands proof of his wife's infidelity as women's voices are heard off-stage praising Desdemona. The two men end their conversation to observe what is occurring in the garden.

Dove guardi splendono raggi / Where'er you look, brightness shines.

Groups of women, sailors and children enter the garden. They praise Desdemona as they present her with bouquets of flowers and gifts. Their music is quite lyrical and has an almost barcarolle-like rhythm. The chorus of praise to our Donna's beauty and chasteness is an ironic counterpoint to the duet that has already ensued and the one that will follow. Desdemona joins in the singing with her voice rising above the others. As the group disperses, their music diminishes, leaving Desdemona alone in the garden.

- The garden gathering and its melodic message has mellowed our Moor's manner. Maybe we have misunderstood all this mischief? That vexes our villain; he knows he is back to the beginning. The spinning of his scheme must start again!

⁴⁰ The dialogue exchange between Desdemona and Cassio in the garden is seen but unheard by the audience--- a pantomime performance, if you will.

- Unfortunately our Donna, as this dastardly deceit develops, is as dense to its danger as her guy's duped deputy. Innocently, she (re)ignites her husband's ire as she hustles into the hall calling for concern about the cashiered Cassio. Beware! Her good deed will not go unpunished!
- The innocent's inquiry elates Iago, as it has restarted his design for disaster. It moves the Moor back into a menacing mode, Ha, haw!

**D'un uom che geme sotto il tuo disdegno /
A man that languishes in your displeasure**

Otello and Desdemona's duet begins softly and almost sweetly. The Moor is still influenced by the gentleness of the garden scene. However, when the Donna sings for Cassio's forgiveness (gli pardona), the entire mood swiftly changes. Otello becomes brusque, harsh and complaining of a throbbing head. She tries to bind his head with her handkerchief, which he throws angrily to the ground. Emilia, her loyal attendant picks up the linen square as a quartet now ensues. Desdemona pleads for understanding of her offense and forgiveness; Otello, in a pitying mode, complains of love's deceitful arts. In a counterpoint, Iago demands the handkerchief from his wife and a verbal and physical struggle ensues. The wife knows her husband's wily ways and fears the worst as he grabs the handkerchief away from her. As the quartet dramatically climaxes, Otello dismisses the women.

- The villain and his victim now voice privately; Iago gloats his grim gambit is going great, but the Moor moans of his misery. His female has been false! Hanky-panky in the halls! Cassio and my cutie, cuddling! "Atroce!" (monstrous) repeatedly is his word of wrath.
- The oily Ensign counsels, "Forget it." No way, Jose! Our Moor is into a venue of vengeance.

**Ora è per sempre addio /
Now and forever, farewell holy memories.**

In a dramatic and musically powerful aria, Otello bids good-bye to his victorious life of war and its ceremonial accoutrements. Throughout the piece, the music is in a march-like cadence. He ends with his flare for over-the-top dramatics, proclaiming, "Farewell, Otello's glory is at an end!"

- The Moor then menaces his nemesis, demanding the Ensign produce evidence of Desdemona's duplicity. He wants facts, not filigree!
- Always quick with the con, Iago invents a tawdry tale of the cashiered Cassio's dream of a "date" with the duplicitous Desdemona.

**Era la notte, Cassio dormia /
It was night. Cassio was sleeping.**

With a semi-sinister, languid musical accompaniment, our resident villain spins a story of the Deputy's tryst with the Moor's missus. It includes some vividly imagined prurient prose, a kiss and unkindly concludes, "The cruel fate that gave you (Desdemona) to the Moor."

- "It was only a dream, not proof positive," the Ensign offers. Otello begs to differ. So Iago continues his con, now concerning the purloined, but still hidden handkerchief. "It was my first love token," Otello opines. "Gee," the vile villain voices, "Then how did it get into Cassio's chest of drawers?"
- That does it! Otello is over the edge and at full voice volume, cacophonously calling for *sangue!*, *sangue!*, and --- *sangue!* (blood!). This Moor's mission is now a messy massacre!

**Si pel ciel marmoreo giuro /
Yes, by the marble heavens I swear.**

The two men, kneeling with hands raised to heaven, create a pact of vengeance. As the duet darkens, it ups its frightening actions vowing bloody business and the voice volume heads for the rafters. As the orchestral accompaniment picks up an implacable march towards doom, the men conclude with an appeal to the "god of vengeance." Despite its bloody message, this duet is one of Verdi's most powerful and quite popular on the concert stage as well in the opera house.

- To a great crash of percussion, the men rush off to manufacture their melodious mischief.
- Cue the Act II curtain. Let us go calm ourselves with some Sauterne! Bene?

Orchestral Introduction to Act III

The brief orchestral opening of Act III begins with sounds reminiscent of the busy and sinister conniving of Iago. It shortly becomes more lyrical and borders on the romantic. That segues into more strident, and agitated melody as the action begins with the entrance of Otello and Iago, deep into dialogue dealing with the denouement of Desdemona and Cassio's comeuppance.

Act III, Scene 1:⁴¹

**In the Castle, a small chamber adjacent to the Great Hall,
Probably the next day or so,⁴² post-Act II's day.**

- A herald drops in on the denouement-designing duo, to hark the imminent docking of a delegation from the Doge. Ho! Ho! Could their communications interfere with Iago's evil intent?
- The conniving couple give little consideration to the docking delegation. They are concentrating on duping Cassio to carelessly confess a secretive "slap and tickle" with our Moor's mate.
- To get this guy to bare all, the evil Ensign will entice him into some salacious Dons' dialogue about dames. This smutty session will be so staged that Otello can overhear. Sort of a subpoena-less CIA set-up.

⁴¹ Depending on budget and the scenic designer, Act III is sometimes done in two scenes (a small chamber outside the castle's Great Hall) and then, the Great Hall. In the cheaper version, the stage set accommodates both scenes; the small chamber becomes an anteroom to the Hall opening (visibly) into the Hall itself. Be surprised!

⁴² Verdi and Boito were geniuses about many things operatic. However, a logical relationship between plot unfolding and the passage of time was not one of them.


- Meanwhile, the object of their dis-affection, the Moor's mate is meandering in the mezzanine and will be directly dropping into their dialogue.
- The Ensign prepares an energetic exit to miss the Moor's missus, but does intone a parting P.S., "Harangue her about the handkerchief."
- "Damn," the Moor menaces, "I forget about that filigreed fazzoletto!"⁴³ "I will demand its delivery!"
- Desdemona drops in and Iago sinuously scampers⁴⁴ out of sight. Now, the stage is set for a difficult duet by our doomed duo.

Dio ti giocondi, o sposo / God keep you merry, husband,

The duet between Otello and Desdemona begins in a lovely, lyrical mode. One hopes for the best. Unfortunately, she starts her "forgive Cassio" plea again. The music takes a hostile and increasingly angry turn as the Moor pleads his head hurts. She produces a handkerchief, but not THE handkerchief. In the ensuing exchange, their voices become voluminous. He demands THE handkerchief. She will get it later. No, now! She refuses to fetch it now! Anger musically mounts and finally he accuses her of not being chaste. She responds modestly but with great assurance, that she is! He demands she swear to it and condemn herself to hell!

Like so many of his other musical attributes, Verdi had a great talent for dramatic duets full of sound and fury. This duet is one of his finer examples.

(Arrow indicates, with little/no-intervening recitative, a subsequent aria/ensemble begins.)



⁴³ In Palermo parlance, a handkerchief. (Really had to research for that rhyme.)

⁴⁴ It is possible!


⁴⁵



Esterrefatta fisso / Terrified, I face your terrible look.

At Otello's challenge to her purity, Desdemona in an aria, pleadingly expresses her lack of understanding of her husband's anger. She sings to him, the tears she now displays are the first in their marriage that have been brought on by suffering.

The Moor is implacable. His anger rises and she argues, she is blameless. At the climax of their duet, he calls her a courtesan. With great force, she again denies the charge. An ominous quiet occurs and then Otello, in the melody that introduced their duet, displaying an icy composure, leads her to the door and pushes her out, singing that he had mistaken her for the courtesan that had married Otello.



**Dio! Mi potevi scagliar tutti I mali/
God, you could have lashed at me...**

In a powerful aria that begins prayerfully, Otello ruefully ruminates on his lost glory and happiness. As the piece increases in intensity and power, the Moor concludes, "Let her confess her crime and then die. Confess! Confess! (confession)." As Otello roars out his bitter climax, Iago intrudes, "Cassio, is coming!" The Moor cuts for cover, but his concealed cubby-hole enables eavesdropping as the guys begin to gab about their games with girls.



Vieni: aula e deserta. / Come; the halls' deserted.

This complex trio involving Otello, Iago and Cassio could serve as a model for the ideal merging of musical emotion with intricate stage business.

Otello's musical commentary until Cassio leaves the scene, is "asides" on what he is observing and hearing. Cassio's musical lines directed to Iago, are delivered with the naïve assumption that their dialogue is between two guys making merry about maidens. Iago's musical line is perhaps the most complex, in that it involves open dialogue with Cassio, asides for benefit of the audience and commentary to Otello.

The first critical point of the essemble occurs when Iago in a voice that cannot be heard by Otello, urges Cassio to tell him about his latest romp in the hay with his mistress, Bianca. (continued)



Vieni: aula e deserta. (continued)

Otello assumes the conversation is about Desdemona, as Iago had previously assured him it would be. The second critical point is when Iago tricks Cassio into producing the handkerchief Iago has planted in his dupe's dorm. Iago examining the "evidence" manages to surreptitiously let Otello also examine it.

Up to the point of the handkerchief being produced, the voices of the three men are not joined. The melody lines for Iago and Cassio are rather subdued but jolly considering their subject matter. Otello's lines become increasingly stronger and angry, as he makes horrendous misassumptions about what is occurring. When at last Otello sees the handkerchief, the voices of the three are powerfully joined. On the heels of that segment, trumpets are heard off-stage announcing the docking of the Doge's delegates. They continue throughout the remainder of the scene. Cassio swiftly leaves, to avoid Otello who will be coming to greet the delegation.

- Off-stage trumpets first and then, a celebratory chorus irreverently intrude on the (now duet) between Otello and his evil Ensign. The off-stage cacophony climbs. So, listen intently, or ask your neighbor, "What's going on with the guys?_"
- Iago fuels his boss's fury by repeating his ribald remembrances of the boys banter.⁴⁶
- The now mucho mad Moor moves toward musing about a method of murder. His gal is guilty! That horrible hanky has hung her, so to speak.
- "Poison," he puts forth. "That's a rotten riposte," Iago responds. He quickly and counters with, "Suffocate your sweetie while she sleeps. Slaying her in her site of sin, would be sensationally subtle."

⁴⁶ Our vile villain just wants to make sure his mischief mission has been accomplished.

- The Moor applauds his awful aide's ironic idea. To pay for that proposal, he promises prompt promotion!
- "Gee guy that would be great," the Ensign intones, "and in quid pro quo, I will contribute quietus to Cassio! "Cool," concurs his commander!
- Then the choraling chorus and tootling trumpets take over the stage; we segue swiftly to the succeeding scene.



Act III, Scene 2:⁴⁷
In the Castle, the Great Hall,
Immediately following Act III, Scene 1.

- When the drapes are drawn, the stage is seen stuffed with everybody and anybody on Cyprus possessing a palace pass. For the benefit of the docked Doge's delegation, the caroling crowd continues their "welcome to our world" melodic mantra from the previous scene.

⁴⁷ As previously noted, Act III is sometimes done in two separate scenes or just one. Makes no difference to the plot or music, just the production budget.

- As is the custom of the country, in the middle of all the "Hi there!" huzzahs, a bevy of beautiful ballerinas and their supporting stud muffins shuffle on to show their step stuff

Ballàbili (Dances).

These dances were not a part of *Otello* at its Italian premiere. There were written by Verdi for the opera's 1894 Paris premiere. "Why," you ask? Well, French grand opera was fearsomely formulistic; one of its "de rigueurs" was a ballet, which must appear in every production, but not before the second act. So Verdi complied, but not happily either with the requirement or its compositional result. In a later letter to his music publisher, Ricordi, Verdi trashed the *Ballàbili* by indicating, "Artistically speaking, it is a monstrosity!" So there!

The *Otello* ballet today is seldom performed, probably for any of several reasons (apart from the Maestro's opinion). It is expensive to stage, it is lengthy for just an operatic insert (six minutes, give or take), and/or it does not move the plot forward or add to it; in fact, it disrupts forward momentum at a very precipitous point. So, you probably won't ever see it, but just in case the following is provided FYI.

Despite Verdi's pronouncement, the music is interesting and some of it is quite lovely and lively. Parts of it are reminiscent of the *Aida* Triumphal Scene ballet.

The work is organized into seven sections, but it has no story line per se. The "cast" includes Turkish slave girls, Greek women, Venetians and warriors from all sides. They are costumed and dance according to Italian assumptions about their cultural characteristics. All told, colorful and interesting by itself. But as an opera insert, it can make a long intense evening, interminable!

Outtakes.

- The *Otello* ballet was the last piece of any type of music Verdi composed. The following could be a Parisian urban legend or worse, apocryphal --- mais, il est tres joli! C'est la vie!

- Why the Parisian Opera requirement of a ballet, but not before Act II? Well, according to legend and lore, the wealthy men of the Paris Jockey Club customarily selected their mistresses from the Opera ballet. They liked to observe and compare their social companions "in action," so to speak--- hence, the mandated ballet. Why post Act I? Well the Jockey Club gents were notorious late-arrivers to the opera. However, most had made it to their seats by Act II.

- Wagner's *Tannhauser* was critically trashed at it Paris premiere, allegedly because he refused to move the Venusberg ballet from Act I. Such are the vagaries of operatic art!



Viva! Evviva! / Hurrah! Hurrah!

As the dancers depart, the Doge's delegation is greeted with a massive chorus of really enthusiastic welcome along, with those omnipresent trumpets tootling in every now and then

- When the trumpets tamper down, the Doge's deputy (Lodovico) sings "Hail to our Hero," a.k.a. the moody Moor. He also delivers to him, the Doge's decree. What could it be?
- While our hero peruses the paper, the delegation makes with diplomatic small talk. A critical comment concerns Cassio. Where is that fine fellow?
- The ever helpful Iago interjects that the big boss and his back-up have disagreed, dumping the deputy into the doghouse.
- Unfortunately, also our Donna donates some dialogue. It caresses Cassio's character, but her caring but concerned comments, carelessly seem to subtly say he is more her paramour than pal. Oops!
- Well, that sends her Moorish mate, maniacal. He seeks to give her one sharp smack for her perilous prater. However, his fearsome fist is fast feinted by the dumbfounded Doge delegate.
- If there were not enough confusion, the chorus chimes in (Orrore! Orrore! / Horror! Horror!).⁴⁸
- Amid this cacophonous chaos, Otello curiously, curtly calls for Cassio to come to court.
- Iago's not enthused with that, but his big cheese commander counsels, "Wait and watch. This kid's coming will catch the conscience of my cutie." ---or, words to that effect.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Such is the wont of operatic choruses.

⁴⁹ Shakespeare was not above borrowing from himself, so for this same sly scenic snare, see *Hamlet*.

- Cassio clumps into court and his commander communicates the Doge's decree: it orders Otello's to voyage to Venice and Cassio is congratulated, he gets to be Governor!
- Roderigo (remember him) and Iago are definitely dumbfounded. Does that decree, deep-six their dubious doings? Time will tell.
- Since Cassio will be quartered on Cyprus and Desdemona will be departing to the Doge's domain, Otello assumes that the Donna cut off from Cassio, will be down in the dumps.
- The Moor manically pushes her onto the parquet proclaiming audibly for all assembled, that she should piangi! (weep).
- With an audience within earshot, she articulates an aria.

A terra! ---si---nel livido /Down! Yes, in the livid slime!

In an aria of great pain and pleading, encoring some of the earlier love theme, our main maiden muses musically as to how her life could have fallen so far, so fast. The sun shines, but not for her.*

* This aria is in a long operatic tradition of what we have termed "poor little me" pieces. There are lots of these Opryland. They are bel canto cousins of country and western blues. While most are lacrimonious, they are usually quite memorable and lovely. This is no exception!

Quell'innocente un fermito / Innocent of heart, no word---

The conclusion of the aria, initiates the onset of one of Verdi's great ensemble pieces. Participating in this magnificent musical mélange, in addition to the chorus* and later, off-stage trumpets and another chorus, you have Emilia (remember her -- Iago's best half.), Roderigo, Lodovico, Desdemona, Cassio, Iago and (last but not least) Otello. Their individual musical lines and messages are, of course, all different: Emilia, by and large, laments throughout Desdemona's pain and the lack of a champion; Roderigo is primarily concerned that his amorous target, Desdemona will be sailing away; Cassio in his somewhat dense demeanor, is happy, happy he's going to be the big boss; Lodovico, somewhat confused by the whole meshuge mess, parrots Emilia's lament; and the chorus wrings their hands and wails as is the wont of operatic choruses. While the text maybe maudlin, the music is astounding, building in a slow deliberate manner to multiple climaxes. Towards the end, Iago issues his order to Roderigo to cut off Cassio in mid-career, literally. Otello, singing for the first time in the ensemble, in fulsome fury orders, "Tutti fuggite Otello!" (All flee Otello!)

Ensemble (continued)

Otello mentally meltdowns---, but musically. He threatens the crowd and curses Desdemona. She is, against her will, pulled from the scene by Emilia and Lodovico. In the center of all this cursing and confusion, off-stage a chorus and those ever-tooting trumpets signal the Cypriots have gotten the word Otello is “good-bye.” They are giving him a “so long, it’s been good to know you,” send-off. Little do they know their main man is having a mini-mad scene. When his frothing finishes, he faints!** The unseen crowd ironically hails, “The Lion of Venice.” Iago meanwhile has been reveling in his poisonous plot’s play-out. With loathsome delight, the vile villain puts his foot on the head*** of an unconscious Otello, proclaiming, “Behold the Lion!” With a cacophonous crash the orchestra and chorus conclude, as the curtain closes!

* Over the centuries since the play was penned, there has been speculation that Othello, like Julius Caesar, was an epileptic. The Bard did present the Moor’s physical behavior in a manor mirroring an epileptic. On stage, it has occasionally been played or sung, with seizure overtones (e.g. In Act III, he doesn’t faint, he has a seizure.)

**At one point in the development of the opera, Verdi had planned NOT to use a chorus. He fortunately changed his mind. The opera’s power would have been seriously diminished without the Acts I and III dramatic choruses.

***An alternative staging has Iago “loathsomely gesturing” at the prostrate form of the unconscious Moor. Be surprised!

- Whoa! After all that seething *sturm und drang*, we need some serious sauterne!

Act IV:

Desdemona’s Digs in the Governor’s Castle.

The night of Act III’s day.

Orchestral Introduction

The final Act begins with some quite lovely, but melancholy music. It contains some previously heard melody and certainly lets you know that what will follow is not a walk in the park on a great spring day! As the orchestra reaches its conclusion, the curtain rises and Desdemona and Emilia enter.

- Desdemona declares to the inquiring Emilia that Otello seems to be back on his meds. The Moor is less maniacal! "He sent me to sleep, saying he would see me soon." Wonder what that means?
- Admittedly our Donna has had a downer of as day, but she seems to decidedly dwell on death. That does not elate Emilia, but it is a swell set-up for a sad song.

**Mia madre aveva una povera ancella /
My mother had a poor maidservant.***

Desdemona's aria relates the sad tale of Barbara, who loved well, but not wisely. Abandoned by her lover, she seems to spend a lot of time down by the river under a willow, weeping. The piece is in a minor key and quite lovely but plaintive throughout. The word "salce" (willow) is repeated frequently almost as a talisman. The tale and its tune, implies that not all ended well for Barbara. _____

*This aria is also variously referred to as "The Willow Song" or "Barbara's Ballad."

- Emilia exits, but at her departure, Desdemona demeanor seems to declaim there'll be a dead Donna before dawn! That serious sign-off seems more sinister and significant than a simple "sleep-tight." Does she mean the Moor's meds are too little, too late?
- Never mind, an aria approaches.

Ave Maria / Hail Mary

Desdemona kneels as she begins her nightly prayer. The words are of the standard catholic prayer, the melody is very lovely and appealing prayerful in tone, as it should be. It is usually deliver very pianissimo and end on a sustained high note that softly fades into silence. The lady then goes to bed

Orchestral Interlude

The music in this brief moment begins rather softly and "innocently;" it also reprises portions of the Act I love duet. Shortly, a disturbed tone is introduced and begins to build threateningly. As it climaxes with a crash of the tympani, a secret door slides open and Otello strides in.

- The Moor roams the room like a caged cougar. His demeanor is daunting. His meds have missed their mark!
- Suddenly, he kisses his sleeping wife multiple times as the music reprises the "un bacio" theme from the love duet. She wakes up (who wouldn't?)!
- Well, that reprises their marital mayhem. He indicates to her, all the items Iago had itemized to inform on her infidelity.
- She protests, she plays for time, please she must pray, she is "pure" and so-forth.
- He poo-poops her protests and pleas, then cruelly communicates, Cassio's is promenading Perdition's pathway.⁵⁰
- She is bereft, his belligerence becomes big-time bellicose as he pushes her into the pillows and off to Perdition. Bummer!
- A day late and a dollar short, Emilia dashes on to declare a dirty deed has been done. Roderigo's been run through with Cassio's cutlass.
- However, a dirtier deed is discovered when the "dead" Desdemona declares she done herself in.⁵¹ Then she dies dramatically and so far as we know, remains dead.
- "No way,!" opines Otello. "I operated her offing, 'cause she was cuddling with Cassio. Iago counseled me about that couples' constant coupling!
- Well, all the cacophony in the couple's chamber has created a crowd including, but not limited to Cassio, Iago, Lodovico, and Montano with a local patrol of MP's.

⁵⁰ That fact is false as will be shortly seen.

⁵¹ Folks, we know--- she's dead? Things like that happen frequently in opryland . The gal is only briefly back to mumble some melodic music. So, just accept it and move on!

- “You’re cuckoo, Commander” counters the enraged Emilia, thus engaging the interest of the entering ensemble. “Your Ensign is evil and you’ve been duped, you dolt (stolto)!” --- or, words (with music) to that effect.
- Well, murder will out and so, all the mischief and machinations enabled by the evil Ensign are enumerated.
- Seeing his horrid handiwork’s been exposed and an axe is being honed for his head, the egregious Ensign heads hurriedly for the harbor.⁵²
- The Moor is mortified that he had been so duped by that dolt, that he done in his darling Desdemona. He divulges his angst in an aria.

Niun mi tema / Let no one fear me.

In an aria of great agony, the Moor laments his day is done (Otello fu) and his has destroyed his chaste and pious Desdemona. (continued)

- [Earlier, the MP sergeant had wisely confiscated the Commander’s cutlass, but he failed to frisk the fellow. Oops!]

Niun mi tema / Let no one fear me. (continued)

As he keens over the body of Desdemona, Otello produces a dagger hidden in his robes and stabs himself. As he dies, the music of the love duet returns and he sings of his earlier kisses to his misjudged mate. The opera ends with four very slow and quiet, percussive booms

⁵² He was last heard of several years later ministering to Sadie Thompson, somewhere in the South Seas.

FYI

So our indiscriminate readership is aware which member of **An Operaphobic Guide's** "creative" team (JP or Sondra Cooney) is responsible for which gaffs, the division of work between the pair is, he writes them, but she makes them readable.

Seven (plus) years ago, encouraged by several regional opera company directors,⁵³ the Cooneys initiated **The Operaphobic's Guide**⁵⁴ series,. To date **Guides** for forty operas have been produced. The majority of these were done pro bono for the companies to use in their educational and/or fund-raising programs. The rest were done for unsuspecting, slower running family members, friends and even, strangers in the street.

Issue #35, *Carmen*, gifted to the Opera Carolina Foundation, was developed for use in supporting the Company's 2010 production of the Puccini opera.

⁵³ Who probably should have known better!

⁵⁴ Originally named, **Irreverent Guides to Enjoying Opera.**

The Operaphobic's Guide Series

COMPOSER	OPERA	ISSUE	DATE
Bernstein*	Candide	#20	4.08
Bizet	Carmen	#35	3.10
Bizet*	Carmen (Encore! Love is better the second time around?)	#36	4.10
Bizet	Les Pêcheurs de Perles	# 7	10.05
Blitzstein***	Regina	#24	6.08
Britten*	Albert Herring	# 8	4.06
De Falla	La Vida Breve	# 13	1.07
Donizetti***	L'Elisir d'Amore	#22	6.08
Donizetti	Lucia di Lammermoor	# 2	5.04
Floyd***	Susannah	#39	6.10
Gilbert & Sullivan	The Pirates of Penzance	# 15	4.07
Gounod**	Faust	#25	9.08
Gounod**	Roméo et Juliette	#17	10.07
Leoncavallo	Pagliacci	# 12	1.07
Mozart**	Le Nozze di Figaro	#27	3.09
Mozart***	Le Nozze di Figaro (Factotum fun, redux!)	#37	4.10
Mozart	Die Zauberflöte	# 6	5.05
Mozart**	Don Giovanni	#19	3.08
Offenbach*	Les Contes d' Hoffmann	# 16	4.07
Poulenc*	Dialogues des Carmélites	#28	4.09
Puccini	La Bohème	#34	1.10
Puccini	Madama Butterfly	# 11	7.06
Puccini	Tosca	# 5	3.05
Puccini***	Tosca (a déjà vu view)	#30	6.09
Puccini**	Turandot	#29	4.09
Rossini**	Il Barbiere di Siviglia	#26	1.09
Rossini***	Il Barbiere (Once more with feeling!)	#31	6.09
Rossini	La Cenerentola	# 10	3.06
Saint-Saëns	Samson et Dalila	# 4	2.05
Strauss**	Die Fledermaus	#21	4.07
Verdi**	Aida	#18	1.07
Verdi	La Traviata	# 9	1.06
Verdi	Macbeth	# 3	10.04
Verdi***	Macbeth (A kilt-kicking encore!)	#38	4.10
Verdi	Nabucco	# 1	10.03
Verdi	Otello	#33	5.10
Verdi	Rigoletto	# 14	3.07
Verdi***	Un Ballo in Maschera	#23	6.08
Weber***	Der Freischütz	#32	6.09

Developed for: *Atlanta Opera Theater at Georgia State University

**Opera Carolina

***Des Moines Metro Opera